

Seeing the Oak

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11;
1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A vampire bat came flapping in from the night and roosted on the roof of a very large. He was covered in fresh blood. Soon all the other bats smelled the blood and began hassling him as to where he got it. He told them to give him a break and let him get some sleep, but they persisted until he finally gave in. "Okay," he said, "follow me." And he flew out of the cave with hundreds of bats behind him. Down the valley he went, across the river, and into the forest. Finally, he slowed down and all the other bats excitedly milled about him. "Do you see that big oak tree over there?" "YES, YES, YES!!" the other bats screamed in a blood frenzy. "Well . . . I didn't." That oak tree is something like this morning's gospel lesson. Let me explain.

The first thing we might notice is that the disciples were married. At least Simon was. He had to be; he had a mother-in-law. It is wonderful that Jesus healed her, but then not so wonderful that she is set immediately to work getting a meal for Jesus, Simon and whoever else was with them.

And then, I wonder, what did Simon's wife think about that? After all it's Simon's and her home. Wasn't she to be the honored hostess? Was her mother the queen of the kitchen, that her daughter doesn't get the honor of preparing and serving the meal?

But is that the stuff that Mark's getting at? Or was he inviting us to encounter the gospel and think about it on a much deeper level, when he recorded this account and its consequences?

You see reading scripture, in my mind, is something like entering or encountering a new house. Initially one sees the surface of the story, the outside appearance of the house, if you will. But the house contains many rooms, and as we venture further into the house we gain a much deeper appreciation and insight as to its true nature.

Just so with scripture. So let's go back to the gospel, let's look at it a little more closely to see if we can actually see what it's saying and what it might mean for us and our discipleship.

It might seem, on the surface, that Simon's mother-in-law's fever was no big deal. But in those days they were without the medicines we have in our time, and a fever might well have been fatal. On being told about her condition, Jesus goes immediately to her, takes her by the hand, and raises her up.

The enormity of what He has just done is increased when we realize this was done on the Sabbath! But He is not alone in his Sabbath breaking. Simon's mother-in-law immediately goes

and prepares a meal for Jesus and the company who have arrived at the home. She, too, works on the Sabbath!

Understand, beloved, that the power of God, reaches across all human barriers and beyond all human rules, to meet real human need in its midst. What speaks to us is Simon's mother-in-law's immediate willingness in her response. Having been touched by the presence of Christ, she immediately goes into His service.

That's what it's about folks. It's not about what happens here for 60 minutes on Sunday. It's what you do with every minute that goes beyond today, through the week, and back to next Sunday.

At the close of the Sabbath the whole city gathers at the door of Simon's home. They bring with them the sick and the possessed, and Jesus heals them. What was private when He healed Simon's mother-in-law, is now very public in a demonstration of the power of God that's vested in Jesus. But this – the fact that it's the power of God – escapes the vision of the crowd and of the disciples; they simply can't see the oak and Jesus' identity remains concealed.

It is the demons, and only the demons, who are fully aware of who and what Jesus is, and He commands them to silence. This silencing of the demons is essential to Mark's telling of the story, as is the uncomprehending nature of the disciples, for everything will not become clear until the end of the gospel. Scholars call this "the Messianic secret," and it demonstrates to us our need to be able to encounter scripture and look beyond the surface story and look at the deeper story it seeks to convey. For we too might suffer from the short-sightedness that sees Jesus only as a great healer, or only as a masterful teacher, and fails to see Him for who and what He really is: God Almighty in human form, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. That's what they might have seen.

In the meantime, Jesus is sought out for His healing power alone. As we shall see, Jesus' healing ministry is not the principal focus of what He's there for at all, although it does play a significant, though minor, role.

We all suffer illness, in all its forms. It's inescapable. It's part of being mortal. It's part of being vulnerable humans. Consequently, Jesus' healing ministry expresses God's care for us and our physical condition. God doesn't want us to suffer. God doesn't want us to be enslaved by emotional and psychological powers beyond our control. Too often we're inclined to see illness and psychological affliction as some sort of punishment or some sort of test of faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus didn't heal all of Israel's ills and suffering, nor was it intended that He should. But the healing He did accomplish brought Him immediate fame. Oh dear. The dangers of being called a celebrity. And that, my friends, had an enormous potential to become an overwhelming distraction.

Jesus is sought for His power to heal, but His real identity is not understood or acknowledged. He leaves the crowd. He goes off to a deserted place to pray, and is hunted down by His disciples who demand that He return because everyone is searching for Him. But Jesus refuses. He doesn't return. He moves on, with His disciples, to other towns in Galilee to undertake His main

task: that of proclamation. He refuses to be identified solely by His God given power to perform miracles. While they indeed demonstrate the power of God, a power that flows through Him, they never and they cannot reveal exactly who and what He is. Rather, Jesus understands His calling is to proclaim the good news.

The miracles do not in and of themselves conflict with that calling, but the uncomprehending response of the people to the miracles does conflict with His calling. Jesus subordinates His power for healing and exorcism to the greater needs for proclamation of the kingdom of God. He also does so because the proclamation of the kingdom is the only context within which the power of healing gains its true meaning. And that proclamation of the kingdom of God, beloved, is our calling also. To proclaim the good news in how we act, in how we speak, in how we live, and in telling our story of how we came to faith and sharing it with others when and wherever it is appropriate.

Some years ago I jotted down a paragraph. I didn't bother recording who wrote it, and I can't remember where I got it, but it speaks to this whole issue and I would like to conclude by reading it to you. It begins:

“Simon and his companions hunted for Him.” Do you ever feel like you're hunting for Jesus? Wonder where he went? I once saw a bumper sticker that read “If you feel far from God, guess who moved.”

I once was at the beach with a group of children from a day camp where I was a counselor and wrangler of horses. Foolishly, this camp (doesn't happen at Nawakwa, by the way) had taken a child only three years old. All of a sudden, a great cry went up among the counselors: the three year old was gone. We fanned out in every direction, and finally found him, walking steadily along, enjoying exploring the beach, nearly three miles from where we had started to look! To us, he was lost. But he didn't feel lost; he knew right where he was! And he was having a great time exploring.

In these days of special anxiety over child abductions, this incident would be even more frightening now than it was then. But the difference in perception between the little child and his pursuers was quite remarkable.

Just so, Jesus had wandered off. He had gone deliberately into a deserted place to be in solitude and in prayer with God. His disciples seemed irritated with him: “Everyone is searching for you.” He made no excuse, nor did He attempt to defend himself from their impatience. He knew what he was doing, and it needed no explanation. He simply led them on to the next village, where He proclaimed the good news.

My prayer is that we may all be gifted with such confidence. And then, then beloved, we shall surely see the oak!

Amen.

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